

THE LILY AMONG THORNS

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A SERMON
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BY C. H. SPURGEON,
AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.

*“As the lily among thorns, so is My love among the daughters.”
Song of Solomon 2:2.*

WE shall not enter into any profitless discussion this morning. We take it for granted that the Song of Solomon is a sacred marriage song between Christ and His church and that it is the Lord Jesus who is here speaking of His church and indeed of each individual member, saying, “As the lily among thorns, so is My love among the daughters.” I will not even enter into any study as to what particular flower is here intended by the word translated “lily,” for it would be very difficult to select a plant from the Holy Land about which travelers and botanists would agree. The lily, which we should most naturally fix upon, is, as I have gathered from books on travel, not at present found in that country, though we may not, therefore, be sure that it was never there or may not yet be discovered. Several other fair and beautiful forms, according to the fancies of various travelers, have been preferred to occupy the place of the plant intended by the original Hebrew, but none of them quite come up to the ideal suggested to an English reader by our translation. I will for once take the liberty to clothe the Scripture in a western dress, if need be and venture to do what Solomon would surely have done if his Song of Songs had been written in England. I shall assume that he means one of our own lilies—either the lily of the valley or one of those more stately beauties, matchless for whiteness, which so gloriously adorn our gardens. Either will do and serve our purpose this morning. “As the lily among the thorns, so is My love among the daughters.” It is of small moment to be precise in botany so long as we get the spirit of the text. We seek practical usefulness and personal consolation and proceed at once in the pursuit, in the hope that it may be with us as with the great Bridegroom Himself, of whom the golden canticle says, “He feeds among the lilies.”

Many are taking root among us now, newly transplanted from the world and it is well that they should be rooted in a knowledge of their calling by grace and what it includes. They ought to know at the commencement what a Christian is when he is truly a Christian. What he is expected to be, what the Lord means him to be, and what the Lord Jesus regards him as really being, so that they make no mistakes, but may count the cost and know what it is that they have ventured upon. Thinking over this subject carefully and anxiously desiring to warn our new converts without alarming them, I could not think of any text from which I should be able, in the exposition of it, to better set forth the position, condition, and character of a genuine Christian. Jesus Himself knows best what His own bride is like—let us hear Him as He speaks in this matchless song. He knows best what His followers should be and well may we be content to take the words out of His own mouth when in sweetest poetry He tells us, “As the lily among thorns, so is My love among the daughters.” Join me then, my brethren, at this time in considering our Lord's lilies, how they grow.

Concerning the church of God, there are two points upon which I will enlarge. First, *her relation to her Lord* and secondly, *her relation to the world*.

I. First, I think my text very beautifully sets forth THE RELATION OF THE CHURCH AND OF EVERY INDIVIDUAL TO CHRIST. He styles her, “My love.” An exquisitely sweet name, as if His love had all gone forth of Him and had become embodied in her. The first point then of her relation to Christ is that *she has His love*. Think of it and let the blessed truth dwell long and sweetly in your meditations. The Lord of life and glory, the Prince of the kings of the earth has such a loving heart that He must have an object upon which to spend His affections—and His people, chosen from among men, whom He calls His church—these are they who are His “love,” the object of His supreme delight. “Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it.” He looked on His people and He exclaimed, “As the Father has loved Me, even so have I loved you.” Every believer, separated from mankind and called into the fellowship of Christ, is also the peculiar object of His love. Not in name only, but in deed and in truth does Jesus love each one of us who have believed on Him. You may each one of you say with the

apostle, “He loved me.” You may read it in any tense you please—He loved me, He loves me, He will love me, for He gave Himself for me. This shall be your song in heaven, “Unto Him that loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, to Him be glory.” Let your hearts saturate themselves with this honeyed thought. Heaven lies hidden within it. It is the quintessence of bliss—Jesus loves me. It is not in the power of words to set forth the charming nature of this fact. It is a very simple proposition, but the heights and depths, the lengths and breadths of it surpass our knowledge. That such a poor, insignificant, unworthy being as I am should be the object of the eternal affection of the Son of God is an amazing wonder. Yet, wonderful as it is, it is a fact! To each one of His people, He says this morning by the Holy Spirit, “I have loved you with an everlasting love, therefore, with loving kindness have I drawn you.” Each one of us may rejoice in the title under which our Lord addresses us—“My love.”

This love is distinguishing love, for in its light one special object shines as a lily and the rest, “the daughters,” are as thorns. Love has fixed on its chosen object and compared with the favored one all others are as nothing. There is a love of Jesus which goes forth to all mankind, for “The Lord is good to all and His tender mercies are over all His works,” but there is a special and peculiar love which He bears to His own. As a man loves his neighbors, but still he has a special affection for his wife, so is the church Christ’s bride beloved above all the rest of mankind and every individual believer the favored one of heaven. The saint is united to Christ by a mystical union, a spiritual marriage bond, and above all others Christ loves the souls espoused to Him. He said once, “I pray for them. I pray not for the world, but for them which You have given Me.” Thus indicating that there is a specialty about His intercession. We rejoice in the largeness and the width of Jesus’ love, but we do not, therefore, doubt its specialty. The sun shines on all things, but when it is focused upon one point, ah, then there is a heat about it of which you little dreamed! The love of Jesus is focused on those whom the Father has given Him. Upon you, my brother or sister, if indeed you are a believer in Jesus Christ, the Lord’s heart is set and He speaks of you in the words of the text as, “My love,” loved above all the daughters. Precious in His sight and honorable so that He will give men for you and people for your life.

Observe that this is a love which He openly avows. The Bridegroom speaks and says before all men, “As a lily among thorns, so is My love among the daughters.” He puts it upon record in that book which is more widely scattered than any other, for He is not ashamed to have it published on the housetops. The love of Christ was at first hidden in His heart, but it soon revealed itself, for even of old His delights were with the sons of men and He bent His steps downward to this world in many forms before ever Bethlehem’s song was sung. And now, since the incarnate God has loved and lived and died, He has unveiled His love in the most open form and astonished heaven and earth thereby. On Calvary He set up an open proclamation, written in His own heart’s blood, that He loved His own even unto the end. He bids His ministers proclaim it to the world’s end that many waters could not quench His love, neither could the floods drown it—and that neither life, nor death, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. He would have it known, for He is not ashamed to call His people, “the bride, the Lamb’s wife.” He declares it that His adversaries may know it—that He has a people in whom His heart delights and these He will have and hold as His own when heaven and earth shall pass away.

This love, wherever it has been revealed to its object, is reciprocated. If the Lord has really spoken home to your soul and said, “I have loved you,” your soul has gladly answered, “This is my Beloved and this is my Friend. Yes, He is altogether lovely.” For what says the spouse in another place? “My Beloved is mine and I am His.” I am His beloved, but He is my beloved, too. By this, dear hearer, shall you know whether this text belongs to you or not. What do you say when Jesus asks of you, “Do you love Me?” Is your heart warmed at the very mention of His name? If you can truly say with Peter, “Lord, You know all things, You know that I love You,” then rest assured you love Him because He first loved you. Doubt not the fact, but be well assured of it, that love in your heart towards Jesus is the certain and infallible pledge of His infinite, eternal, and immutable love to you. If His name is on your heart, then be sure of this, that your name is on His breast and written on the palms of His hands. You are espoused to Him and the bands of the mystical wedlock shall never be snapped. This is the first point of the relation of the church to her Lord—she is the object of His love.

Next, *she bears His likeness*. Notice the first verse of the chapter, wherein the Bridegroom speaks, “I am the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valleys.” He is the lily, but His beloved is like Him, for He applies His own chosen emblem to her, “As the lily among thorns, so is My love among the daughters.”

Notice that He is the lily and she is as the lily, that is to say, He has the beauty and she reflects it. She is comely in His comeliness which He puts upon her. If any soul has any such beauty as is described here, Christ has endowed that beloved soul with all its wealth of charms, for in ourselves we are deformed and defiled. What is the confession of this very spouse in the previous chapter? She says, “I am black”—that is, the opposite of a lily. If she adds, “but comely,” it is because her Lord has made her comely. There is no grace but what grace has been given and if we are graceful it is because Christ has made us full of grace. There is no beauty in any of us but what our Lord has worked in us.

Note, too, that He who gave the beauty is the first to see it. While they are unknown to the world, Jesus knows His own. Long before anybody else sees any virtue or any praise in us, Jesus describes it and is pleased with it. He is quick to say, “Behold, he prays,” or, “Behold, he repents.” He is the first to say, “I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself.” Love’s eyes are quick and her ears are open. Love covers a multitude of faults, but it discovers a multitude of beauties. Can it be so, O my soul, can it be that Christ has made you comely in His comeliness? Has He shed a beauty upon you and does He Himself look satisfactorily upon it? He whose taste is exquisite and whose voice is the truth—who never calls that beautiful which is not beautiful—can He see a beauty in your sighs and tears, in your desires after holiness, in your poor attempts to aid His cause, in your prayers and in your songs, and in your heart’s love towards Him—can He see a beauty in these? Yes, assuredly He can or He would not speak as He does in this text. Let His condescending discernment have all honor for this generous appreciation of us. Let us bless and love Him because He deigns to think so highly of us who owe every thing to Him. “You are,” says He, “My love, as the lily.”

It is evident that the Lord Jesus takes delight in this beauty which He has put upon His people. He values it at so great a rate that He counts all rival beauties to be but as thorns. He looks upon the court of an earthly monarch and sees my lords and ladies, but makes small account of them compared with His poor saints. If in that court He spies out one that loves Him, one who wears a coronet and prays, He marks that one and counts him or her “as the lily among thorns.” There is a wealthy household, honored and famous among the old county families, but in it there is no lover of the Savior except one and she perhaps is a little maid whose service is among the pots, yet shall she be as the wings of a dove covered with silver. “As the lily among thorns” shall she be. All the kingdoms of the earth are but thorns to the Lord Jesus compared with His church. Be they Roman, German, French, or English—all empires with all their splendors are mere thickets and thorns upon the common bramble bushes and thorn coverts—the haunts of wild and noxious creatures in the view of the King of kings. But His church and those that make up the body of the faithful are as lilies in His discerning eyes. He delights in them. He finds a sweet content in gazing on them. So you see the Lord has given to His people His likeness and that likeness He looks upon and loves.

Bringing out still further the relationship between Christ and His church, I want you to notice that *her position has drawn out His love*. “As the lily,” says He, “*among thorns*, so is My love.” He spied her out among the thorns. She was at first no better than a thorn itself—His grace alone made her to differ from the briars about her, but as soon as ever He had put His life and His grace into her, though she dwelt among the ungodly, she became as the lily and He spied her out. The thorn thicket could not hide His beloved. Christ’s eye towards His people is so quick because it is cleared by love. There may at this time be in a Popish convent one truly seeking Jesus in spirit and in truth. He spies out the believer among the rest who trust in themselves and calls her His love among thorns. There may be at this moment in the most godless haunt in London a poor, trembling heart that loves Jesus in secret—the Lord knows that heart and it is to Him as a lily among thorns. You, perhaps, are the only serious working man in the shop in which you earn your daily bread and the whole band hold you in derision. You may hardly know yourself whether you are really a Christian, for you are sometimes staggered about your own condition—and yet the enemies of Christ have made up their minds as to whose you are and treat you as one of the disciples of the Nazarene. Be of good courage, your Lord discerns you and knows you better than you know yourself. Such is the quickness of His eye that your difficult and perilous position only quickens His discernment and He regards you with the more attention. The thorns cannot hide you, thickly as they cluster around you—in your loneliness you are not alone—the Crucified is with you.

“As the lily among thorns” wears also another meaning. Dr. Thompson writes of a certain lily, “It grows among thorns and I have sadly lacerated my hands in extricating it from them. Nothing can be in higher contrast than the luxuriant, velvety softness of this lily and the withered, tangled hedge of thorns

about it.” Ah, beloved, you know who it was that in gathering your soul and mine lacerated not His hand only, but His feet and His head and His side and His heart—yes and His inmost soul. He spied us out and said, “Yonder lily is Mine and I will have it,” but the thorns were a terrible barrier—our sins had gathered round about us and the wrath of God most sharply stopped the way. Jesus pressed through all that we might be His and now when He takes us to Himself, He does not forget the thorns which girded His brow and tore His flesh for our sakes. This then is a part of our relationship to Christ, that we cost Him very dearly. He saw us where we were and He came to our deliverance. And now, even as Pharaoh’s daughter called the young child’s name Moses, “Because,” said she, “I drew him out of the water,” so does Jesus call His chosen “the lily among thorns,” because such she was when He came to her rescue. Never will He forget Calvary and its thorns, nor should His saints allow that memory thereof to fade.

Yet once more I think many a child of God may regard himself as still being a lily among thorns because of his afflictions. Certainly the church is so and *she is thereby kept for Christ’s own*. If thorns made it hard for Him to reach us for our salvation, there is another kind of thorn which makes it hard for any enemy to come at us for our hurt. Our trials and tribulations, which we would gladly escape from, often act as a spiritual protection—they hedge us about and ward off many a devouring foe. Sharp as they are, they serve as a fence and a defense. Many a time, dear child of God, you would have been an exposed lily, to be plucked by any ruthless hand, if it had not been that God had placed you in such circumstances that you were shut up unto Himself. Sick saints and poor saints and persecuted saints are fair lilies enclosed by their pains and wants and bonds that they may be for Christ alone. I look on John Bunyan in prison writing his, “Pilgrim’s Progress,” and I cannot help feeling that it was a great blessing for us all that such a lily was shut up among the thorns that it might shed its fragrance in that famous book and thereby perfume the church for ages. You that are kept from roaming by sickness or by family trials need not regret these things, for perhaps they are the means of making you more completely your Lord’s. How charmingly Madame Guyon wrote when she was immured in a dungeon. Her wing was closely bound, but her song was full of liberty, for she felt that the bolts and bars only shut her in with her Beloved and what is that but liberty? She sang—

*“A little bird I am,
Shut from the fields of air.
And in my cage I sit and sing
To Him who placed me there.
Well pleased a prisoner to be,
Because, my God, it pleases Thee.
Nought have I else to do,
I sing the whole day long.
And He whom most I love to please
Does listen to my song.
He caught and bound my wandering wing,
But still He bends to hear me sing.”*

“As the lily among thorns,” she lived in prison shut in with her Lord and since the world was quite shut out, she was in that respect a gainer. O to have one’s heart made as “a garden enclosed, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed.” So let my soul be, yes, so let it be even if the enclosure can only be accomplished by a dense growth of trials and griefs. May every pain that comes and casts us on our bed and lays us aside from public usefulness, may every sorrow which arises out of our business and weans us from the world, may every adversary that assails us with bitter, taunting words only thicken the thorn hedge which encases us from all the world and constrains us to be chaste lilies set apart for the Well-Beloved.

Enough upon this point, I think, only let me entreat all of you who have lately come to know the Lord to think much of your relationship to *Him*. It is the way by which you will be supported under the responsibilities of your relationship to the world. If you know that you are His and that He loves you, you will be strong to bear all burdens. Nothing will daunt you if you are sure that He is for you, that His whole heart is true to you that He loves you especially, and has set you apart unto Himself that you may be one with Him forever. Dwell much, in your meditations, upon what this text and other Scriptures teach of the relationship of the renewed heart to Christ and know Him of whom you are so well known. May the Holy Spirit teach us all this lesson so that it may be learned by our hearts.

II. But now, secondly, our text is full of instruction as to THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE CHURCH AND EACH INDIVIDUAL BELIEVER TO THE WORLD—"The lily among thorns."

First, then, *she has incomparable beauty*. As compared and contrasted with all else, she is as the lily to the thorn thicket. Did not our Lord say of the natural lilies, "Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these"? And when I think of Christ's lilies, adorned in His own righteousness and bearing His own image, I feel that I may repeat my Master's words and say with emphasis, "Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these!" In Christ's esteem, His church bears the bell for beauty. She is the fairest among women. She is not to be compared—she has to be contrasted with the rest of mankind. Our Lord means that if you take worldlings at their best and in their bravest attire—in their pomp and glory and parade—they are but as thorns in contrast with His church. Though the church may seem to be little and poor and despised, yet she is better than all the princes and kingdoms and glories of the earth. He means that true Christians are infinitely superior to ungodly men. These ungodly men may make a fair show of virtue and they may have much prudence and wit and count themselves wise and great, but Jesus calls all unconverted ones, "thorns," while His own believing ones He compares to "lilies." The thorns are worthless. They flourish and spread and cumber the ground, but they yield no fruit and only grow to be cut down for the oven. Alas, such is man by nature, at his best. As for the lily, it is a thing of beauty and a joy forever. It lives shedding sweet perfume and when it is gathered, its loveliness adorns the chamber to which it is taken. So does the saint bless his generation while here and when he is taken away he is regarded with pleasure even in heaven above as one of the flowers of God. He will before long be transplanted from among the thorns to the garden enclosed beyond the river, where the King delights to dwell, for such a flower is far too fair to be left forever amid tangled briars.

There are among worldly people some who are very fair to look upon in many respects—philanthropic, kind, and upright—they have many virtues, but since these virtues have no bearings towards God and no reference to Christ, He counts the bearers of them to be but thorns. What virtue can there be in him whose principle in life is disregard of his Maker and disbelief in his Savior? He is an avowed rebel and yet would be commended by the Lord whom he rejects? How can it be? Acts done from other motives than those of obedience to God or love to Christ are poor things. There may be a great inward difference between actions which outwardly are the same. The apple of nature has never the flavor of the pomegranate of grace. It may seem even to excel the fruit of grace, but it is not so. Two babes before us may appear alike as they seem to sleep side by side, but the child of nature, however finely dressed, is not the living child and the Lord will not own the dead thing as belonging to His family. Ah, you that are struggling after holiness for Christ's sake—you that are seeking after virtue in the power of the Holy Spirit—you have the beauty of the lily, while all else are still to Christ but as a thicket of thorns.

Yes, and let me say that I am sorry to add—a real Christian is as superior even to a professing Christian as a lily is to thorns. I know churches in which there are many who make a profession, but, ah me, it is a pity that they should, for their life does not adorn their doctrine, their temper is not consistent with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. They live like worldlings, to amass money, or to carry on business, or to enjoy good eating and drinking, or to dress and go to parties. They are as much for this world as if they were never renewed and it is to be feared they never were. It will often grieve those who really love the Lord to see how mere professors pretend to do what saints labor to perform. Saints are mimicked—I almost said mocked and mimicked—by empty professors and this is a standing source of sorrow. Their cold words often vex the zealous heart and pierce it as with thorns. When you are full of zeal, their lack of consecration almost kindles indignation in the minds of those who are willing to give their last penny—yes, and their last breath for their Master's honor. Do not, however, be at all astonished, for it must be so. He who is full of the grace of God will always be as the lily among thorns, even in the professing church. Do not marvel, young brother, if older professors dampen your ardor and count your warm love to be a mere fanaticism. God give you grace to keep up your first love and even to advance upon it, though the thorny ones wound and hinder you. May you be distinguished above your fellow professors, for I fear that unless it is so, your life will be a poor one.

This then is the relationship of the church to the world and of Christians to the world—that they are as much superior to the unregenerate in moral and spiritual beauty as the lily is to the thorns among which it finds itself.

Secondly, in the comparison of the saint to the lily we remark that *he has, like the lily, a surpassing excellence*. I point not to its beauty just now, but to its intrinsic excellence. The thorn is a fruit of the curse—it springs up because of sin. “Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth unto you.” Not so the lily—it is a fair type of the blessing which makes rich without the sorrow of endless care. The thorn is the mark of wrath and the lily is the symbol of divine providence. A true believer is a blessing, a tree whose leaves heal, and whose fruit feeds. A genuine Christian is a living gospel, an embodiment of goodwill towards men. Did not the old covenant blessing run, “In you and in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed”? I cannot refrain from quoting a metrical meditation of one who loved the Song of Solomon and drank into its spirit. He says of the church, she is—

*“A radiant thing, where all is gloomy else,
Florescent where all else is barrenness.
A blossom in the desert, that proclaims
Man is no friendless outcast, hopeless doomed
To traverse scenes of wickedness and grief,
But, pilgrim as he is, has One who plans,
Not only to protect but cheer his way.
Oh, ever testifying desert flower,
Still holding forth the story of God’s love,
How amazing it is that busy throngs
Pause not to look on you! That few reflect
On the strange fact of your existence still,
A lily among thorns—a life in death,
Distinct from, yet in contact with the world;
Burning, yet unconsumed; though cumbered, free
With glorious liberty!”*

Yes, the church is a blessing, a blessing abiding and scattering its delights in the midst of the curse—and each particular believer is in his measure a blessing too, “as the lily among thorns.”

A true Christian knows not how to harm his fellow men. He is like the lily which stings no one and yet he lives among those who are full of sharpness. He aims to please and not to provoke and yet he lives among those whose existence is a standing menace. The thorn tears and lacerates—it is all armed from its root to its topmost branch, defying all comers. But there stands the lily—smiling, not defying—charming and not harming. Such is the real Christian—holy, harmless, full of love and gentleness and tenderness. Therein lies his excellence. The thorn pierces, but the lily soothes. The very sight of it gives pleasure. Who would not stop and turn aside to see a lily among thorns and think he read a promise from his God to comfort him amid distress? Such is a true Christian. He is a consolation in his family, a comfort in his neighborhood, an ornament to his profession and a benediction to his age. He is all tenderness and gentleness and yet it may be he lives among the envious, the malicious, and the profane. He is a lily among thorns. The thorn says, “Keep away. No one shall touch me with impunity.” The lily cries, “I come to you. I shed my soul abroad to please you.” The sweet odors of the lily of the valley are well known. Perhaps no plant has so strong a savor about it of intense and exquisite sweetness as that lily of the valley which is found in Palestine. Such is the sanctified believer. There is a secret something about him, a hallowed savor which goes out from his life, so that his graciousness is discovered, for grace, like its Lord, “cannot be hid.” Even if the regenerate man is not known as a professor, yet does he reveal himself by the holiness of his life—“his speech betrays him.” When I was resting in the south I wandered by the side of a flowing stream, gathering handfuls of maiden-hair fern from the verdant bank—and as I walked along I was conscious of a most delicious fragrance all around me. I cast my eye downward and I saw blue eyes looking up from among the grass at my feet. The violets had hidden themselves from sight, but they had betrayed themselves by their delicious scent. So does a Christian reveal his hidden life. His tone and temper and manners speak of his royal lineage, if indeed the Spirit of God is in him. Such are the people of God—they court no observation, but are like that modest flower of which the poet says—

*“She never affects
The public walk, nor gaze of midday sun.
She to no state nor dignity aspires,
But silent and alone puts on her suit
And sheds a lasting perfume, but for which*

*We had not known there was a thing so sweet
Hidden in the gloomy shade."*

I want you, dear Christian people, to be just like this—to have about you a surpassing wealth of blessing and an unrivalled sweetness of influence by which you shall be known of all men. Is it so with you or are you as rough and stern and repellant as a thorn bush? Are you as selfish and as quarrelsome as the unregenerate? Or do you shed yourself away in sweet odors of self-denying kindness in your families and among your neighbors? If you do, then does Jesus say of you, "As the lily among thorns, so is My love among the daughters."

The last point with regard to our relationship to the world is that the church and many individual Christians are called to endure singular trials which make them feel "as the lily among thorns." That lovely flower seems out of place in such company, does it not? Christ said, "Behold, I send you forth as sheep among *sheep*"—no, no, that is my mistake—"as sheep among *wolves*." It is a very blessed thing to be as sheep among sheep—to lie down with them under the shadow of the great rock and feed with them in green pastures under the Shepherd's eye. This is our privilege and we ought to value it greatly and unite with the church and frequent its ordinances, but even then we shall, some of us, have to go home to an ungodly family, or to go out into the world to win our bread and then we shall be as sheep among wolves. Grow in the church and you will be lilies in the garden, but you cannot always live in the Tabernacle, and so you will have to go back to the ungodly world and there you will be lilies among thorns.

The lily startles you if you find it in such a position. Often you come upon one of God's elect ones in a most unexpected manner and are as much amazed as if an angel crossed your path. This is the wonder of the lily among thorns. You are making your way over a wild heath and come to a tangled thorn thicket through which you must force your way. As you are walking through the dense mass, rending and tearing your garments, suddenly you stand still as one who has seen a vision of angels, for there, among the most rugged brambles, a lily lifts its lovely form and smiles upon you. You feel like Moses at the back of the desert when he saw the bush which burned with fire and yet was not consumed. So have you met in a back slum, where blasphemy abounded, a beauteous child of God, whom all recognized as such and you have felt amazed. So have you in a wealthy family full of worldliness and vanity come upon a humble man or patient woman living unto Christ and you have asked how came this grace to this house? So, too, in a foreign land, where all bowed down to crucifix and image, you have casually met with a confessor who has stood his ground among idolaters, declaring for his God, not by his speech so much as by his holy walk. The surprise has been great. Expect many such surprises. The Lord has a people where you look not for them. Think not that all His lilies are in His garden. There are lilies among thorns and He knows their whereabouts. Many saints reside in families where they will never be appreciated any more than the lily is appreciated by the thorns. This is painful, for the sympathy of our fellows is a great comfort. Lilies of the valley love to grow in clusters and saints love holy company and yet in some cases it must not be—they must live alone. Nor need we think that this loneliness is unrelieved, for God goes out of the track of men and He visits those whom His own servants are passing by. The poet says—

*"Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air."*

But the poet forgot that God is in the wilderness and the solitary place and the sweetness of lonely flowers is His. He who planted the lily among thorns sees its beauty. It is God's flower and does it waste its sweetness because no human nostril smells it? It were blasphemous to count that wasted which is reserved for the great King. The Lord understands the incense of nature better than we do and as He walks abroad He rejoices in His works. Grace struggling in loneliness is very choice in God's esteem. If man sees you not, O lonely believer, you may nevertheless sing, "You, God, see me." The flower which blooms for God alone has a special honor put upon it and so has the saint whose quiet life is all for Jesus. If you are unappreciated by those around you, do not therefore be distressed, for you are honorable in the sight of God.

The lily is altogether unassisted, too, by its surroundings—"the lily among thorns" borrows nothing from the growth which gathers about it. A genuine Christian is quite unhelped by ungodly men. What is worse, he is cumbered by them. Yet through divine grace he lives and grows. You know how the good seed could not grow because of the thorns which sprang up and choked it, but here is a good seed, a choice bulb, which flourishes where you could not have looked for it to do so. God can make His people

live and blossom even among the thorns, where the ungodly by their evil influences would choke and destroy them. Happy it is when the gracious one can overtop the thorn thicket which would check his growth and make his influence to be known and felt above the grossness of surrounding sin.

We would not do justice to this text if we failed to see in it a reminder of the persecution to which many of the best of God's people are subjected. They live all their lives like the lily among thorns. Some of you, dear friends, are in this condition. You can hardly speak a word but what it is picked up and made mischief of. You cannot perform an action but what it is twisted and motives imputed to you which you know not of. Nowadays persecutors cannot drag men to the stake, but the old trial of cruel mockings is still continued—in some cases it rages even more fiercely than ever. God's people have been a persecuted people in all times and you only fare as they fare. Bear well the burden common to all the chosen! Make no great wonder of it—this bitter trial has happened to many more before—and you may well rejoice that you are now in fellowship with apostles and prophets and honorable men of all ages. The lily among thorns should rejoice that it is a lily and not a thorn—and when it is wounded it should consider it a matter of course and bloom on.

But why does the Lord put His lilies among thorns? It is because He works transformations, singular transformations, by their means. He can make a lily grow among thorns till the thorns grow into lilies. Remember how it is written, "The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose." He can set a Christian in a godless family till first one and then another shall feel the divine power and shall say, "We will go with you, for we perceive that God is with you." It cannot happen in nature, but it does happen perpetually in grace—that the sweet perfume of the lily believer, shed abroad upon the thorn thicket of the ungodly—turns it into a lily garden. Such holy work among ungodly people is the truest and best "FLOWER MISSION." They do well who give flowers to cheer the poor in their dreary habitations, but they do better still who are themselves flowers in the places where they live. Be lilies, my dear brethren, preach by your actions and by your kindness and by your love, and I feel quite sure that your influence will be a power for good. If the Holy Spirit helps all of you to stand among your associates as lilies among the thorns, the day will come when thorns will die out and lilies will spring up on every side, sin will be banished and grace will abound. An Australian gentleman told me yesterday that in his colony the arum lily abounds as much as weeds do with us. When will this happen spiritually on our side of the globe? Ah, when! Blessed Lord, when will You remove the curse? When will You bring the better days? These are ill times when the thorns grow thicker and more sharp than ever—protect Your lilies, increase their number, preserve their snowy whiteness, and delight Yourself in them for Jesus' sake, Amen.

LETTER FROM MR. SPURGEON

DEAR READERS—Having purchased and paid for the ground for the Girls' Orphanage, I am now anxious to proceed with the undertaking. The first block of buildings will consist of the houses for 250 girls with schools above them. I have not yet obtained a contract, but I have reason to believe that the land, with drainage, etc., will cost £8,000. Of this I have promises to the amount of £3,000. I now commit this new enterprise to the guardian care of the Lord of heaven and earth, hoping that He will so prosper it that the first stone may be laid on my birthday, June 19th.

Yours for the Orphans' sake,

C. H. SPURGEON

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